

Homo Sapiens

By Jesse Kohn

It was about four months after I graduated from college that I finally got a job working at the zoo. The pay wasn't bad: all the chicken nuggets I could stomach and my own room in the cage where they kept the human beings.

I've always been a little nervous starting anything new, but I remember that first day being particularly unnerving, waiting for the zoo to open. I asked Joseph, who had been there for years, if there was anything I could help set up. He told me just to relax, maybe go down the slide a few times.

"Nothing like the slide to clear your mind," he said.

Emily and Cindy were waiting in line to go down the slide.

"You look a little green," Emily said.

"First day," I replied.

"First day, huh?" said Cindy. "I remember my first day. I spent the whole day hiding in the laundry closet."

"Listen," said Emily. "There's nothing to be nervous about. We just do our thing and the people come and watch and sometimes ask us to do a trick."

When I got to the top of the ladder, a blow horn resounded through the park announcing that the gates were opening. My heart did a somersault, and I slid down the slide.

Sure, the job had little to do with what I had studied in college, but after having spent four months looking for work, I was desperate. It wasn't so bad at the zoo, either. I liked our habitat. It reminded me a lot of home. The part of our habitat that faced the visitors was kind of like a backyard. Behind the backyard was the fake house where we each had our own little room; we could always go nap there when we got tired. There was a pond-sized bathtub we were encouraged to swim in, and there was always music playing in case we felt like dancing.

Rainy days were best because there weren't many visitors. The zookeepers had hired a wonderful bunch of human beings, and it was a pleasure getting to know them all. It turned out every single one of them had something special they could do—Joseph composed music, Emily wrote poetry, Cindy read Tarot cards—but even more impressive than what they could do, was who they all were. Sometimes I wondered if the zookeepers—or even the wide-eyed and fascinated visitors—had any idea just how special we all were.

On sunny days, the visitors crammed around our cage and hollered and cooed at us. Our trainers entered every hour and had us perform tricks in exchange for chunks of cookie dough, which, of course, none of us could refuse. My tricks usually had to do with dancing. One of our trainers spotted me dancing one evening and realized quickly that I had formidable moves. Of course the visitors ate it up. Many nights I'd go to sleep with my toes painfully calloused from fancy footwork and my limbs aching from my shaking legs. Joseph did mostly magic tricks, and Emily rode her bicycle in circles.

Once I recited a poem I'd memorized in French, but by the time I'd reached the third stanza no one was listening.

On the third Sunday of every month, our trainers would leash us up and take us for a leisurely walk about the park. Without the glass between us and them, the visitors were much more respectful. They even seemed a little frightened.

One time a little girl dropped her doll, and Cindy picked it up and handed it to her. Her father suddenly pulled her away from Cindy.

"Don't touch it, Amanda!" he shouted. "That's a wild animal!"

Cindy was so angry the trainer had to wrestle the girl's doll away from her.

But working in the zoo had its perks, too. And eventually I'd been there so long that many of visitors started to remember me.

“It’s Jesse!” the children would shout. “Do the dance! Dance for us!” And they’d dance with me on the other side of the glass.

There was even an old woman who came now and then and asked me to recite French poetry to her.

One time I slipped out of the cage late at night and snuck into the “Oceans of the World” exhibit. The lights were out, but glowing jellyfish illuminated the walkways. I followed those drifting pillows of light through tunnels of artificial coral, past walls of water flashing with silver schools of tuna, and the circular tank with the circling sharks. Finally, I found what I was looking for: an immense cylindrical tank in the very center of the exhibit. In the dark, I could just barely read the plaque: *ARCHITEUTHIS, Giant Squid*. It was murky in the tank, and I stared at that black abyss for a long time, seeing only my own reflection trying to peer in through the glass. And I started thinking about who I was and about the other human beings, and I thought about what we were all doing in that zoo. And then, all at once, I realized that I had been looking into the eye of the squid. And in a flash of twisting tentacles and a cloud of ink even darker than the water, it disappeared into the shadows.

“And who are you really?” I whispered, staring into the tank.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Where does the narrator of the passage work?

- A at a library
- B at a zoo
- C at a movie theater
- D at an amusement park

2. From which point of view is this story told?

- A first-person point of view ("I")
- B second-person point of view ("you")
- C limited third-person point of view ("he" or "she")
- D omniscient, or unlimited, third-person point of view ("he/she/they")

3. Read the following sentences from the story: "It wasn't so bad at the zoo, either. I liked our habitat. It reminded me a lot of home. The part of our habitat that faced the visitors was kind of like a backyard. Behind the backyard was the fake house where we each had our own little room; we could always go nap there when we got tired."

What can be concluded from this information?

- A The narrator does not like working at the zoo very much.
- B The zookeepers are not taking good care of the narrator.
- C The narrator is a human being on display at a zoo.
- D The narrator has spent his or her whole life working at the zoo.

4. How does the narrator's attitude about being at the zoo change throughout the story?

- A laid-back at first, then thoughtful, and finally nervous
- B laid-back at first, then nervous, and finally thoughtful
- C nervous at first, then laid-back, and finally thoughtful
- D thoughtful at first, then laid-back, and finally nervous

5. What is a theme of this story?

- A true love
- B religious belief
- C the horrors of war
- D human nature

6. Read the following sentences from the story: "'You look a little **green**,' Emily said. 'First day,' I replied."

What might the word "**green**" mean in the sentence above?

- A inexperienced or sick
- B healthy or confident
- C friendly or very happy
- D old or exhausted

7. Select the word that best completes the sentence.

The human beings at the zoo have special talents, _____ composing music, writing poetry, and dancing.

- A consequently
- B otherwise
- C earlier
- D such as

8. What does the narrator sneak off to see at the end of the story?

9. What question does the narrator ask at the very end of the story?

10. Why does the narrator ask the question at the very end of the story? Support your answer with evidence from the passage.

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 880

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8. What does the narrator sneak off to see at the end of the story?

Suggested answer: Responses may vary in specificity. Students may respond that the narrator sneaks off to see the giant squid, the "Oceans of the World" exhibit, or similar variations.

9. What question does the narrator ask at the very end of the story?

Suggested answer: The narrator asks, "'And who are you really?'"

10. Why does the narrator ask the question at the very end of the story? Support your answer with evidence from the passage.

Suggested answer: Responses may vary, as long as they are supported by the passage. For example, students may respond that seeing the squid reminds the narrator of his or her own exhibit at the zoo and inspires contemplation about the question of personal identity. The narrator asks who the squid really is because the narrator has learned that visitors to an exhibit have a limited understanding of what they are looking at. Alternatively, students may respond that the narrator, reflected in the tank's glass, is asking the question of himself or herself. Staring at his or her reflection in the eye of the squid has made the narrator question the difference between human beings and animals, and whether a meaningful difference even exists.